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The evolution of the workspace

DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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When Rob Sykes established his dot-com startup Clarity Inc. in Calgary three years ago, he worked out of his basement. But as the company grew, he took over space in a downtown office building previously used by an oil company.

The first thing he did was take out the boardroom table and replace it with a race-car set.

Of course, the sight of the toy setup was disconcerting to some early clients of the company. One prospect commented that the office seemed more like a fraternity dormitory than an e-commerce company. Yet the race set came to epitomize the hard-driving culture of the firm — with many of the high-tech staff spending all-nighters working on code for a major client, what's wrong with having an opportunity to blow off steam at 4 a.m. by racing little plastic cars around a track?

Such is the nature of office space in the dot-com economy.

The past few years have seen massive changes in the culture of the typical office, and are best typified by the dot-com startup. Cubicles are out, open spaces are in. Stuffy meeting rooms? Get rid of them for a playground. Stacks of shelves containing documents? Replace that with a wall full of Lego sets — after all, the latter spurs creativity, while the former promotes bureaucracy.

The emergence of the dot-com economy is having a profound impact on the commercial real estate business right across North America. According to a report by Cushman & Wakefield, the U.S. real estate services concern, about 25 per cent of the newly rented office space in Manhattan in the first quarter of this year was to high-tech startups. The demand from these organizations for unique office environments can be seen in the changes occurring in the commercial real estate industry. The portfolios being peddled by leading brokers now include a greater number of new, funky quarters that have plenty of renovation potential.

Going too are the rigorous rules — and indeed the entire concept — of "work hours." Staff work when they want to and, often, where they want to. If your best programmers decide they want to crawl under their desk and work there, so be it. Imagination is key to their productivity, and if they can do their best work in a dark cave surrounded by pillows, let them.

What we see today with the Internet startup will probably be typical five years out: the culture of many companies is set to change as a less-strict culture invades the workplace. This is coming about as the traditional corporate sector becomes more involved with electronic business. These companies will discover, as have high-technology startups, that current office environment and culture doesn't promote the creative, rapid action environment that is crucial to success in the new wired economy.

Countless traditional companies in Canada will soon establish their own e-business incubators — they'll spin off their staff, a mixture of executive and technical talent, into a separate organization. And they'll place them in a working environment just like today's dot-com startup. There, they will be able to get things done without the smothering influence of the traditional corporate bureaucracy. And as the company becomes more involved in e-business, more people from the organization will find themselves in this unique cultural environment.

All this is probably good. If anything, the explosion of e-business is laying siege to the cubicle-infested, innovation-stifling, imagination-killing, office of today.

Dilbert would be happy.

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